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# Daschle blocks bill on military voting

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Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle is blocking passage of a bill that would authorize polling places on domestic military installations and ease the obstacles some service members face in absentee balloting.

The Clinton administration also opposes the bill, which the House approved in a 297-114 bipartisan vote Oct. 12. Many Republicans accuse Democrats of stopping the

## Measure puts polling places on bases

bill as part of a larger strategy to suppress the military vote, just as the party did in Florida in challenging hundreds of overseas military ballots.

Senate aides say Mr. Daschle, South Dakota Democrat, placed a "hold" on the bill, a maneuver that would kill the measure if the Senate does not vote before the current session expires at year's end. "They're shutting down military

absentee ballots in Florida and putting a hold that could have increased the total number of people who could have voted in this election," said Rep. Bill Thomas, California Republican and the bill's chief sponsor. "It would have been a lot nicer if Daschle had cooperated and it would have moved through both houses. . . . It's a little embarrassing. They are still stopping this thing. Some people can't

be shamed into anything." A spokesman for Mr. Daschle did not return a phone message yesterday.

Meanwhile, a federal appeals court in Atlanta yesterday upheld a lower court's decision to reject the effort by 13 Florida Democratic voters to nullify 2,400 absentee ballots, mostly from military personnel. Democrats hoped a favorable court decision would tip the presidential race to Vice President Al Gore. *see MILITARY, page A12*

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# MILITARY

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ident Al Gore. George W. Bush won 65 percent of overseas ballots opened after the Nov. 7 presidential election in Florida.

Mr. Thomas said his bill would legally authorize what several commanders have done in the past: open polling places on remote bases where it is difficult for personnel and their families to get to the polls. Such a case exists in his district at the desert-surrounded Edwards Air Force Base, he said.

Mr. Thomas said his bill was prompted by fears that the Pentagon would more strictly enforce its policy against polling places, based in part on Civil War-era law.

Two days before the House passed the bill, Defense Department General Counsel Douglas A. Dworkin strongly opposed it in a letter to Mr. Thomas, who is chairman of the House Administration Committee.

"The Department has a long-standing policy prohibiting the use of military installations as polling sites for elections," Mr. Dworkin wrote Oct. 10. "This policy is based on sound public policy of maintaining strict separation between the military and the political process. The policy of separating the military and partisan politics is critically important to maintaining public support for and confidence in our armed forces, as well as maintaining good order and discipline within military ranks."

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Mr. Dworkin, quoting federal law directly, said personnel face criminal penalties if they "impose or attempt to impose any regulation for conducting any general or special election in a state, different from those prescribed by law" or "interfere in any manner with an election officer's discharge of his duties."

Mr. Thomas said his bill would override the old law.

Glenn Flood, a Pentagon spokesman, said the department every two years sends out directives, as it did in December 1999 in preparation for this year's election, reminding commanders against allowing campaign activities or polling places on military bases.

"This time people actually looked at that," said Mr. Flood. "People this year all of a sudden said, 'We've been breaking the law.'"

He said a few reserve and National Guard armories were used in the last election as voting centers for the general public.

The Thomas bill states, in part, that service secretaries "may make a building located on a military installation under the jurisdiction of the secretary available for use as a polling place in any

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federal, state or local election for public office."

Mr. Thomas and two other committee chairmen wrote to Defense Secretary William S. Cohen on Oct. 17 asking him to reconsider the Pentagon's opposition.

"We concluded that while the provision cited by the general counsel was intended to prevent intimidation of voters at polls by the military, it does not prohibit merely the location of a voting site on DoD property," said Mr. Thomas, House Armed Services Chairman Floyd D. Spence, South Carolina Republican, and Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Bob Stump, Arizona Republican.

A spokesman for Mr. Thomas said the congressman has not received a reply from Mr. Cohen.

Democrats were put on the defensive during the Florida recount when scores of party lawyers challenged military absentee ballots based on what Republicans considered minor technicalities.

Service members have reacted angrily in e-mail exchanges, and some retired officers have complained to Mr. Cohen. The secretary has ordered the Pentagon inspector general's office to review the entire process of processing overseas ballots, some of which lacked a postmarked date used by some election boards to validate the vote.

The Bush campaign actively cultivated the votes of service members, promising to rebuild what it considers a weakened mili-